

Terra Sigillata

By Surojana Sethabutra

By the time I wrote this article for "Clay Alchemy", a cultural exchange project between Thai and Australian ceramic artists, it had been two months since the first day we met! During this time much excitement, joy, interaction and bonding took place. I have learnt that good Terra Sigillata (means sealed earth in Latin) requires a period of setting time to get ultra fine particles which form a glaze-like skin, memories might have some similarity.

On the first day of our tour, Sunday, October 8, 2006, we were on the way to Vipoo's Studio. Along the way, I was impressed with the lively and lovely scenery. Plants, flowers, fences, doorways and entrances, everywhere was so fantastically beautiful, clean and well organized. I am not surprised Vipoo decided to stay here in this country for good! It is a very basic human need...for a healthy environment. We then went to Über Gallery where Vipoo has an exhibition of his work.

It is 16 years since I have met Vipoo at Rangsit University, Bangkok as a ceramics student. He has proved to be a faithful one in his belief, in mermaid and undersea creatures. But astonishingly, his ideas, finishing touches, aesthetics and knowledge grew out of control. He could be distinctively known for his work and personality in the near future.

After visiting the Über Gallery, we went to the Cacao, a homemade chocolate shop where I ordered a tiny, precious, red ruby like chocolate to consider and try its crisp shell with molten berry flavor inside. It was the first and unforgettable desert of the trip.

On Monday, October 9, 2006, we visited Prue Venable's house and studio. Her work appealed to me with its apparent simplicity that concealed the laborious making process. Her clear black and white porcelain forms contained references to 18th and 19th century English industrial pottery and challenged contemporary metal and plastic vessels. Her concepts, lifestyle and functional utensils are reflected in her serene studio works where beauty in everyday life seemed easily reached and frozen in moments.

For me, Tuesday, October 10, 2006, was a day of understanding. At Monash University, an untitled slip-cast drapery bed by an anonymous artist was gracefully set against the window pane. How could I explain this delicacy and profound understanding of materials and techniques? Since then I have had a realization how great art stands for itselfquietly.

In the afternoon, we were on the trip to Seal Rocks and Phillip Island. The sky was so clear, bright ultramarine with a trace of cloud that I could not resist to take photographs. Moreover, at night time, it was, again, so clear and we can see more stars than usual, especially the Southern Cross



which was a constellation of stars generally only visible in the southern hemisphere. On the left hand side we located a large 7 pointed white star called the Federation Star, representing the federation of the colonies of Australia on 1 January 1901. There was one point of each of the six original states, and one to represent all of Australia's internal and external territories. Here, we could understand the origin of the Australia flag.

On the following day, October 11, we went to Shepparton Art Gallery. In the Gallery we had special permission to scrutinise Australia's leading collections of historical and contemporary Australian ceramics. This provided a good opportunity to see an extensive and impressive collection which included works by the first convict potters through to individual studio potters and commercial potteries that had been developed through years of endurance in their careers. From this visit the life cycle of ceramic art, artist, art gallery and art museum can be seen as essential constitutions for humankind.

On the way back to Melbourne on Thursday October 12, I noticed that there were a lot of Eucalyptus trees. It had been said by people who were not very observant that Australian trees were monotonous in color, dark, gloomy and dry-looking, chiefly on account of their hard evergreen leaves. But the tender green, the bright gold, the copper or glowing red of the young leaves are quite unique in tree foliage, and, a far large number of trees here bear blossoms of bright colors – the yellow, white, red and ever green flowers of the Eucalyptus trees, those kings of the Bush, native trees of Australia entitled "Gum" trees. Probably, nowhere in the world is there more variety in plant life than in this so-called monotonous and dreary region of the world to which the euphonious name of "Australia" was given. In addition, Eucalyptus trees, actually have perhaps more species than any other trees of the world, about four hundred species!

In the afternoon on Friday, October 13, we visited Andrea Hylands' country home near Castlemaine, land of wild life, studio and gallery. Andrea has long been known as an internationally renowned Australian ceramic artist whose eloquent work is almost impossible to categorize, but in touch with high sensibilities. One could have fallen in love at the first sight by her soft personality.

On the weekend we went to Split Point Lighthouse for our holidays together. Through Geelong, we took a coffee break and photos by the waterfronts. And it was my first investigation on the Coffee Menu how the Australian integrated descriptive words with the appearances and taste of the coffee such as :-

Shot Black	for	Espresso
Long Black		Black Coffee
Flat White		Milk Coffee
Skinny		Low Fat Milk Coffee
Etc.		

It was one of the most efficiency ways of communication.

We arrived at Split Point Lighthouse in the afternoon. It is a picturesque place. I took a lot of photos of the interior and surroundings including Brett, our driver who, finally, became one of our group members. He started to collect ceramics ware and knew what was considered authentic. He appreciated our aesthetic perception. And, he acted like a landlord of the place.

On our last day together, Monday, October 16, 2006, we went to Sony Manning's place. Her works and techniques were very sweet and fragile liked fragrance from her flowering garden or the flowers in her vase. Nowadays, Sony is suffering from her wrist pain that came from the clay work. Hopefully, she will recover from her operation soon.

Simon Lloyd's luncheon in the garden could be described just like in an Australian lifestyle magazine, both food and atmosphere. With a lot of energy from his daughter, the Thai and Yellow Rama 9 flags welcomed us in front of the entrance. Design played an important part in his life as well as materials, techniques and technologies. We could trust and rely on his aspect.

Finally, in the evening, it was our farewell party at the Yacht Club. We saw fleets of sailboats floating side by side. Although it might look like they all stay together, each of them remained at a distance from one another, making harmonious rhyme that vividly strengthen the harbor's atmosphere. And when each boat parted on its journey, searching for moments of pride, solitude would be its best companion with the pleasures of freedom, or, sometimes, compassion of misfortunes. Our journey was about to reach the finale. We simply ended it with goodbye hugs. Hope was our only reliable expectation...to see each other again in the year 2008...for interchange group exhibitions.

At this moment, I would like to show my gratitude to the Australia - Thailand Institute, as well as Thai Airways for funding and support our valuable experience. And most of all, Mr. Vipoo Srivilasa who has strengthened cultural relations between Thai and Australian ceramics artists deserves a recognition for his genuine willfulness to make this project possible.

For more detail of the project visit www.clayalchemy.net